How does the knowledge of being created in the image of God impact self-understanding and behaviour in comparison to the anthropology of other worldviews?

As a junior minister of the Gospel and a new convert, I have found myself in a situation: I have a zeal for sharing what I've found – the life-altering influence of Jesus Christ – and yet, the underlying worldview that I operate on, that permeates my self-understanding and instinctive behaviour, is yet to be entirely harmonised with, and is yet to catch up to, a completely Christian, Biblical anthropology, deeply rooted in an experiential knowledge of being created in the image of God.

I would suggest that to answer this essay question, there needs to be a fundamental distinction made between mere intellectual knowledge and deeply rooted experiential knowledge. I would argue that, especially when viewed from a postmodern lens, some people may know Biblical truths about the image of God before one's worldview is divinely inspired and aligned. Therefore, if the question were read superficially, verbatim, mere "knowledge" in the intellectual interpretation of such a word may impact self-understanding at a shallower level, as the new Christian believer "talks" and professes their faith, without considerably changing deeply rooted behaviours, or how the believer "walks" in the image of God.

The key difference, I would argue, based on the work of Bruce L. Bauer[1], is whether one walks alone or in community with mature believers, experiencing what he calls "worldview change in the discipling process"; mature believers must themselves be discipling the new believer from a deeply rooted Biblical worldview for knowledge to change another person's anthropology and worldview – shifting, patiently, who they deep down believe they are, what they've been promised, and then come to truly know themselves to be who they are, in the holistic Biblical anthropological sense.

For making my points in this essay, I'm using the postmodern worldview as an anthropological comparison. To help illustrate and contextualise postmodernism, Abigail Doukhan[2] points to the holocaust as a single definitive historical event that signalled the failure of "modernist" thinking, the "mindset that there is only *one* way to do things", arguing that:

"After Auschwitz, observes postmodern thought, there can be no more thought of a single all-encompassing ideology, be it secular or religious, inasmuch as such a mindset inevitably gives rise to violence and barbarity". *(Doukhan)*

Such a devastating, large-scale, modern historical event shaped Western anthropology in a profoundly concerning way, as it may pertain to a traditional understanding and acceptance of the Theist worldview. WWII is described as an ideological climax, a "final fulfillment", whereby modernity was:

"characterized by a systematic hatred of otherness or diversity, ever seeking to encompass all within one and a single direction… Postmodernity will arise out of this realization and will henceforth define itself as the guardian of otherness at the detriment of oneness..." (Doukhan)

In reaction, the postmodern worldview has arisen as “largely a reaction to scientific or objective efforts to explain reality”[3]. The anthropological effect, as Bruce L. Bauer[4] describes, is a spirituality that is “anti-institutional… very private, personal, and individual”; pluralistic, and relativistic:

“The postmodern worldview is pluralistic and rejects the concept of any absolute moral truth that has worldwide application… it does not reject all standards of truth, but believes that truth is developed and accepted by each community.” (Bauer)

Postmodernism does not leave a vacuum of values, but rather, according to Bauer, counterparts arise in the valuing of authenticity, experiential knowledge, holism, and community participation, bleeding into experiences such as altruism, environmentalism, globalism, and creativity.

In their book, *Semi-Secular Worldviews and the Belief in Something Beyond**[5]***, Palmqvist and Jonbäck explore the worldview of “semi-secular Nones”:

“when asked whether they believe in God, they usually provide answers like ‘Perhaps not God per se, but I do believe in something’” (*Palmqvist and Jonbäck)*

The authors, on pages 2 and 3, outline the components of worldview theory as:

“an overarching framework which enables the analysis of the fundamental commitments and practices of religious individuals, as well as… those who identify themselves as… semi-secular or outright atheist. Traditionally in philosophy of religion, the predominant worldviews under consideration are theism, which is inherently religious, and naturalism, which is nonreligious or secular.” (Palmqvist and Jonbäck)

However the book goes on to explore the research done on worldviews that break from this traditional binary of predominant worldviews in a religious sense, offering in-depth analysis of the varieties of manifestations of “Somethingism”. They are not the first, but rather, one of the more contemporary contributors in this field; and the authors posit insights on anthropological comparisons such as found in the following statement, which relates to my previously discussed value amongst postmodern people: a regard for avoiding belief in an erroneous ideological metanarrative at all costs:

“As we move to greater generality to avoid error, our number of beliefs is constantly lowered. Just think of the difference between believing, on one hand, all the propositions of a traditional, Christian worldview, with its rich metaphysical teachings about a triune personal God, incarnated and heavily involved in bringing salvation to a humankind tarnished by sin, and, on the other, believing the one proposition ‘a transmundane reality exists’. The pure weak somethingist has clearly done her best when it comes to avoiding falsehoods, but the resulting view boils down to one single belief. The traditional Christian, on the other hand, has thousands of beliefs, and while she is in much greater risk of being in error, she might also end up believing thousands of truths.” (p.32)

The vagueness and “thinning”[6] of belief language may not merely be simplicity of spirituality, but a different kind of complexity, masked for social purposes. Pavel Eder, in his article titled “*Transformative Communication: A Hermeneutical Approach to Leading Generation Y and Z to*

Christ" ***[7]*** offers the "hermeneutic circle" lens as an avenue to relationally introduce any of the many "thousands of truth" which Christians believe, aspects of God's narrative that may resonate:

"Attempting to step outside this circle to present an entirely new conceptual framework to the secular worldview is futile, as is seeking to forcefully impose religious beliefs through aggressive evangelism. Instead, effective communication in mission entails entering the hermeneutic circle appropriately. This necessitates a posture of attentive listening, followed by the sensitive offering of aspects of God's narrative that resonate with individuals' existing pre-understandings (Heidegger's Vorverständnis), thereby dynamically shaping their worldview." (Eder)

As part of the worldview conversion process, Bauer[8] emphasises that postmoderns "will need to have a sense of belonging long before they believe", suggesting that "it will take longer and will usually require deliberate steps or the results will only be conversion to the community and not to the Christ of the community." He ultimately recommends that personal ministry to postmodern believers requires learning about the postmodern cultural context, placing more emphasis on discipleship, within small groups in the church, exhorting that kindness and charity be shown to those attempting to fulfil the difficult work of patient, deep, worldview conversion[9].

As I posited in my thesis, the worldview conversion process can be a lengthy and complex affair, whereby many postmoderns exist in what Bauer, quoting Jimmy Long[10], calls a "collision of narratives":

"The conversion process in narrative evangelism can be called a 'collision of narratives.' When God's story touches our story, a collision takes place. When we encounter a story that calls into question part of our story, we need to reconsider our story. We may not like the process because it can shake our equilibrium" (1997:190)

We must look closely at the experience of existing in a tension between a worldview not yet thoroughly rooted in "the knowledge of being created in the image of God", whereby one's self-understanding and behaviour remains influenced by a deeply rooted postmodern anthropological worldview; one consisting of pluralistic and relativistic tendencies, inherently requiring a consideration of diverse personal experiences, and making sense of reality within a slowly revolving hermeneutic circle. Within this framework of consideration, discipleship and worldview conversion can in fact turn to the Word of God to meet this need.

Bauer says "it is the telling of the biblical story that sets up tension in people's lives that allows the Holy Spirit to bring about conversion and change at the worldview level"[11]. True. But which version of the Biblical story gives us the greatest 'collision of narratives', the most discipleship mileage, the most plurality, the most room for relativism, and in all truth, the most thorough spirituality, holism, authenticity, community, globalism, *and* avoids boiling faith down to one all-encompassing ideological truth?

The answer can be seen in the last adjectival component of the phrase “Soli, Prima*, Tota* Scriptura”. It is, I suggest, the great work of the ongoing Reformation, to integrate the broadest, most total readings of the Bible, all of its books, its poetry, its plurality, into a coherent and accessible worldview, that will not only patiently reach postmodern thinkers, but quietly weave the world’s “Somethingists” into God’s story.

The conclusory insights brought by Abigail Doukhan help show how postmodern believers are to be met where they are at, at the level of their anthropological worldview:

“The biblical narrative avoids the typical over-simplification into which the metanarrativistic discourse often falls. Contrarily to the metanarrative which feels that it must be all-encompassing in order to be effective, the biblical narrative holds no such pretense. It knows that it must appeal to a mere remnant, to a mere minority and, as such, does not seek to veil reality in all of its complexity, twists, and turns. Thus, the biblical narrative never makes an effort to hide the weaknesses of its protagonists, their doubts, and their faults. It does not hide the lifetimes of doubt, failure, waiting, and patience often preceding the fulfillment of God’s promises. Likewise, Jesus never hides the demands of the Kingdom on his followers leading often to a life of exile and suffering, or to a life where truth often remains hidden from sight and can be only grasped through faith. But such an unveiled and raw account of a truth dressed in humble garb rather than trumpeted as the one-size fits all remedy to personal discontent, is in fact much more appealing to postmodern audiences intent on authenticity and realism versus the inauthenticity and deception often contained in the promises of a rosy future of metanarratives.” (Doukhan)

Thus, we come to conclude - and it is from the long way around that we wind up considering “knowledge of being created in the image of God” as a fundamental tenet of our faith, of our anthropological story – how self-understanding and behaviour may be impacted.

If by “witness”, we mean sharing our firsthand *experiential knowledge* of Jesus Christ, flowing from both our character and our sharing – our way of relating and our way of narrating – we can, as a community, faithfully hold our awareness of Biblical anthropology as having a *goal of glorification*, citing texts such as Genesis 1:26-27, 5:1-3, 9:6, Colossian 1:15, 3:9-11, and Romans 8:29, whilst *also knowing* that our anthropology includes a *fallen human condition*, citing texts such as Romans 3:10-12, and 23. Our behaviour and self-understanding will lie somewhere on a spectrum; however, if we are immersed in community discipleship and baptised into the body of Christ, these aspects of ourselves will tend in one Spirit-led direction: towards the image of Christ.

We exist, both as a community and individuals, in an anthropological process of worldview conversion, enacted by the various workings of the Triune God. We may see it from 1 John 1:8-10 describing the overcoming of deception, and confessing; and reflected in the message the Lord Christ Jesus preached from the outset of his ministry: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17); through to 2 Corinthians 3:18: “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord”.

To answer the question in short, I assert that *intellectual knowledge* of being created in the image of God will do *close to nothing* to impact self-understanding and behaviour, within the prevailing climate of postmodernism, even amongst professed Christian believers, *without* the manifold workings of the Holy Spirit through the trifold witness of the Word *in its plurality*, through Prayer *with a believers communion as experiential knowledge influencing one's perceived anthropology*, and the Body of Christ *as the provider of authentic, patient, worldview-informing discipleship*.

We are to relate to and narrate through *all of this*. *This* is how the knowledge of being created in the image of God impacts self-understanding and behaviour in comparison to the anthropology of other worldviews.

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